

WASHINGTON, DC- In an effort to make our railways and communities more secure, Congresswoman Linda T. Sánchez sent a letter (attached) to House conferees involved in final House-Senate negotiations of H.R. 3, the Transportation Equity Act-Legacy for Users (TEA-LU), asking negotiators to keep two key provisions that would improve the safety of our nation's railway infrastructure. Congresswoman Sánchez is especially concerned about rail safety due to several major derailments and rail accidents in the Southern California area, most recently last October in North Whittier. The freight train accident occurred in a residential neighborhood, destroying two homes and damaging twenty others.

The Congressional letter, also signed by Reps. Napolitano, Roybal-Allard and Watson, coincides with a report released earlier this week from the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) evaluating the train derailment in North Whittier. The report cites the safety record and failure of "joint bars" (which connect large sections of rail) as a main cause of the accident. According to the NTSB report, cracks in the North Whittier joint bar developed over time and could likely have been spotted if inspections had been performed on a regular basis. The Federal Railroad Administration (FRA), which directly oversees rail safety, should implement inspection and testing standard for joint-bars. The FRA has had a task force look at the issue for over a year, but has yet to take meaningful steps towards more thorough inspection.

"I strongly urge my colleagues to keep these very important provisions in TEA-LU," said Congresswoman Sánchez. "The NTSB findings clearly highlight the importance of frequent inspection of our railways and the proposed provisions would ensure that the FRA institutes meaningful and thorough inspection standards that will prevent more derailments," added Sánchez.

Specifically, the letter submitted by Sánchez and the other three Congresswomen asks conferees to maintain two provisions in the Senate-passed version of TEA-LU: 1) Provision sponsored by Senator Byron Dorgan (ND) requiring more frequent inspection of "joint bars" by the FRA. This provision largely mirrors the safety recommendations that the NTSB issued in its recent report and is a simple but critical step to improving rail safety. 2) Provision sponsored by California Senator Barbara Boxer that will fund a study that directs the Secretary of Transportation to study the impact of grade crossings on accidents and on the ability of emergency responders to perform public safety and security duties. With increased rail traffic in Southern California, the issues of grade crossing safety and delays are gaining increasing importance.

*House and Senate Conferees met for the first time yesterday. They must reconcile the differences between the House and Senate-passed versions of TEA-LU before the bill can become.